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ABSTRACT

Reports from the National Commission on Excellence in Education, the Carnegie Commission, and recent survey responses from colleges and universities across the United States have verified suspicions about student inabilities to demonstrate acceptable levels of literacy skills. The first step toward achieving excellence is structuring, demanding, and tasking, based on the premise that low expectations and failure to demand acceptable performances from teachers and students breed mediocrity. Many college teachers engage in the very teaching that has come under fire at the public school level: low-level, regurgitive, unimaginative teaching that leads to low-level cognitive demands in class and in evaluation. Teachers must expect great things of students and then demand that they be achieved. Time on task is the one variable that leads students to achievement of learning and skill development. The second step toward achieving excellence is nurturing and supporting. Teachers should behave in ways that say they are there to help students achieve the objectives that have been defined for the course. Teacher behavior reflecting caring and support can help to reduce absenteeism and curb rising attrition rates. Expecting, demanding, and helping students achieve should be both personal and professional educational goals. (LH)

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TOWARD ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE

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TOWARD ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE

It takes no great genius to determine that we have formidable problems in our educational system. Reports from the National Commission on Excellence in Education and the Carnegie Commission, as well as recent survey responses from colleges and universities across the United States, have verified our very worst suspicions about student inabilities to demonstrate acceptable levels of literacy skills. As well, magazine and newspaper articles appear weekly to document that our nation's students are being instructed by teachers who are not nearly so gifted, talented, and committed as were teachers just a few short years ago. And all of these ills appear at a time when we most desperately need to be at our most productive and creative. So recognizing the problem is not difficult to do at all. Doing something about the problem will take some creative thinking about *how* we got ourselves into this mess and what we must do to get out of it.

I contend that the *what* may be well described by a very simple equation, the first part of which is structuring, demanding, and tasking. Socrates' notion that "to teach is to ask" might well be rewritten slightly to read "to teach is to task." *Pygmalion in the Classroom* highlights the predictive power of teacher expectation upon the behaviors and performances of students. Studies of parental expectations for their children echo similar findings. Low expectations and failure to demand acceptable performances from teacher, students, and our children breed mediocrity.

Recent literacy studies at the University of Texas discovered that many college teachers are engaged in that very teaching that has come under fire at the public school level--low-level, regurgitive, unimaginative teaching that leads to low-level cognitive demands in class and in evaluation. Students in college are not being asked to read and write any more frequently or at higher levels than they were asked to do in high school. And reports of high school classroom demands document unconscionably few assignments that demand demonstration of literacy skills. Demanding more of students means more work for both students and teachers--more reading and more writing for students, and more thoughtful evaluation of student products for teachers. Tasking means work for everyone!

Ross Perot shared an interesting perception recently. From his own experiences in hiring employees from whom he expects great things; he finds that individuals who have never had to work very hard for what they have or where they are in life have learned to *expect* great things to continue to happen. Conversely, he has found that individuals who have had to expend more energy to achieve what they want in life are those who seek opportunities to *work* for excellence and for privilege. A dramatic difference exists between these workers!

As well, teachers must expect great things of students and then demand that they be achieved. When teachers remark that they cannot give homework to students who have time-consuming work and family responsibilities, I ask them how they expect students to learn! Time on task is the one variable that leads students to achievement, learning, and skill development. Sadly, there are well-documented stories of high school graduates who are illiterate when they enter college and illiterate when they graduate. Those stories are examples of professional irresponsibility at its worst; it is a failure to teach and a waste of unknown potential!

We simply do not know what students are capable of achieving. Unbelievable as it may be, Einstein's seventh-grade teacher pronounced him a slow learner who was incapable of learning mathematics. Teachers perform such "acts of God" every day when they behave in ways that deny students the opportunities to excel. Alfred North Whitehead coined the term "soul murder"--the short-changing of students in the learning process; lowering expectations or watering down courses are present-day examples.

The second part of the equation is nurturing and supporting. Teachers should behave in ways that say they are there to help students achieve the objectives that have been defined for the course. We all have fond memories of individuals in our lives who have provided important support in our pursuit of personal and academic objectives. In my own background, there was a step-grandfather whose consistent hope that I would go to college, whose time spent reading comics aloud to me and encouraging me to read them for myself, provided me with a strong goal and with some early learning that gave me a boost up the academic ladder. I found that teachers really appreciate students who recognize letters and read reasonably well when they enter school! That appreciation and subsequent support spilled over into providing me with great confidence to attempt other activities--e.g., sports, drama, spelling bees. Human support systems accomplish remarkable feats.

Many of us are privileged to have had remarkable teachers who have made dramatic differences in our lives. In my life, there was a community college history teacher who took it upon himself to know us well enough prior to our first day of class that he could introduce and provide interesting background information about each student as a way of getting us all acquainted. He behaved in other ways that indicated he was concerned and interested in each of us. When I lost my part-time job in the midst of the 1957 recession, this teacher called to ask if I would be interested in helping him build a rock wall in his backyard until I was able to find another job. That thoughtful support meant that I could remain in college. Because he was such a friend to all of his students, it was very easy to forgive his unremarkable instructional style. It is important to note, also, that many of us went on to major in history!

There are more recent stories of caring and support by modern day teachers. One that comes to mind appeared in an *Innovation Abstract* (April, 1981). It is a story about the faculty at Central Oregon Community College and their decision to begin calling students, visiting them perhaps, after their first absence from class. I had shared the experiences of the Luzerne County Community College faculty when they began to use this intervention strategy to reduce absenteeism and curb the rising attrition rates. Luzerne's success was exciting! Central Oregon decided to give it a try, and their own success story--freshman to sophomore retention increased by 222 percent the first year--is recorded in this document.

Caring about people is reflected in one's behavior. Talk is cheap; caring is behaving in ways that convey to others that they are important and that you care about them. I learned early on that teaching is not a matter of how right the teacher is or how much content she has stored away or how well she performed on her college examinations or how many speeches she makes around the country. Genius in teaching is best demonstrated by exciting students to want to learn what the teacher has to teach. Expecting, demanding, and helping students achieve should be our personal and professional educational goals!

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Excerpted from "Excellence for Students," a presentation to the National Conference on Teaching Excellence, the University of Texas, May, 1983.

"I WAS GOING TO HAVE THEM WRITE A TERM PAPER,
BUT THEY COULDN'T WRITE.
SO I WAS GOING TO GIVE THEM A TEST,
BUT THEY COULDN'T READ.
SO I GAVE THEM ALL A "B" AND
SENT THEM HOME!"
GOOD THING THEY
COULD FOLLOW
BREAD CRUMBS!

Managing Editor, Karen Watkins
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